

The Mystery of Godliness



Thrust Statement: Paul's hymn sets forth the Gospel in its essentials.

Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 3:9, 15-16.

December begins the season in which people are reminded of the birth of Jesus. Two thousand years ago, an angel of God announced the birth of the Messiah. The month of December is a time in which people gather in churches to hear about the birth of the One who came to bring salvation to a lost and dying world. The prophets foretold the birth of Jesus and searched diligently as to the time of this grace coming from God. They wanted to know the time and circumstances of the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. Even the angelic host desired to stoop low and look into things that would transpire with the birth of the Messiah. In effect, none understood perfectly the events surrounding “the mystery of godliness.”

Before one embarks upon an exposition of 1 Timothy 3:14-16, perhaps it would be beneficial to reflect upon Matthew's and Luke's account of the birth of Jesus Christ. The two accounts give insight as to the miraculous nature of the events that transpired in the incarnation of Jesus. Matthew begins his book by calling attention to the circumstances surrounding the coming of Jesus:

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife,

because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus (**Matthew 1:18-24**).^[1]

One cannot read this text without a consciousness that the birth of Christ involved the miraculous: “what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (**1:20**). Not only does Matthew call attention to the miraculous, but he also calls awareness to the prophetic nature of the birth of Christ: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet” (**1:22**). Approximately 740 years earlier, **Isaiah (7:14)** had foretold the coming of this One who is also called “Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.” One cannot mull over the words of Paul to Timothy (**1 Timothy 3:14-16**) without contemplation upon both Matthew and Luke in their birth accounts of Jesus. Luke’s account of an angel’s visit to some shepherds tending to their flocks is also quite illuminating:

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told (**Luke 2:8-20**).

In the reading of these two accounts concerning the birth of Jesus, the prophet Micah comes to mind, especially with the words of the shepherds: “Let’s go to Bethlehem.” Approximately 735 years earlier, Micah prophesied concerning the birth of Jesus that the angels announced in Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels:

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (**Micah 5:2**).

The words "whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" address the origin of the One to be born of a virgin (**Isaiah 7:14**; **Matthew 1:21-23**). In other words, His origin is much earlier than his human birth. Jesus, in one of His encounters with the Jews, informed the Jews: "**before Abraham was born, I am!**" (**John 8:58**). It is significant that Jesus did not say, "I was," but rather, "I am." Thus, Jesus expresses the eternity of His being and of His oneness with the Father.

In the prophecy by Micah (**2:5**) concerning the birthplace of Jesus, Matthew says regarding the visit of the Magi: "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him" (**Matthew 2:1-2**). Did the religious leaders understand **Micah 2:5** as being Messianic in tone? Yes! Listen once more to Matthew as he reports conversations from the religious leaders in their response to a question from Herod concerning the whereabouts of His birth:

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel" (**Matthew 2:3-5**).

This One "whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (**Micah 5:2**) is the same One whom John speaks of in his prologue to his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men (**John 1:1-4**).

John steps back into eternity as he seeks to divulge something of the preexistence of the Word. Then he climaxes this prologue with: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (**1:14**). Again, one stands in awe as one reads a prayer of Jesus to the Father:

"Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. ² For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. ³ Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. ⁴ I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began (**17:1-5**).

In the writings of Paul, one observes one who is filled with the wonder of it all. As Paul sat in prison in Rome, he writes to the Ephesians (AD 61) the following words as he reflects upon “the mystery of his will”:

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸ that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. ⁹ And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. ¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory (1:3-14).

If one wishes to understand clearly the “mystery” that Paul develops in the Ephesian epistle, then one needs to read the Book of Ephesians as a whole—read the book as a book. Paul wanted the Ephesians to understand the redemption events that transpired “in Christ Jesus”:

⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰ His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³ I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory (3:7-13).

Paul says that God chose to make this mystery—“the manifold wisdom of God”—known through the church. Today, the church—God’s family—is the “pillar and ground” of proclaiming this gospel—Jesus as God’s way of salvation. This way of salvation is through faith in Jesus as God’s atonement for the sins of the world. This

introduction to “the mystery of godliness” brings one to the beginning of this message of Paul to Timothy concerning “the mystery of the faith” (**1 Timothy 3:9**), which he also equates with “The Mystery of Godliness” (**3:16**). Paul expresses this “mystery of godliness” in poetic fashion, which constitutes, perhaps, one of the earliest creeds of the church and, no doubt, was one of the earliest songs of the church:

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory (**3:16**).

“The mystery of godliness” is that God in the person of Jesus Christ entered this world (**John 1:1, 14**) in which He paid the penalty for man’s transgression of God’s Law in order to redeem all those who put their trust in Him (**Romans 3:21-26**). That this mystery of devotion (εὐσεβεία, eusebeia, “to be devout,” “piety”) refers to Christ is evident from the fact that what follows in **verse 16 (1 Timothy 3)** refers to Him. Paul also articulates this “mystery” in his second letter to the Corinthians:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (**2 Corinthians 5:17-21**).

This “mystery of godliness” (**1 Timothy 3:16**) = “the word of truth” (**Ephesians 1:13**) and this “word of truth” = “the gospel of your salvation” (**1:13**) and this “gospel of your salvation” = “the mystery of the faith” (**1 Timothy 3:9**) and “the mystery of the faith” = “Christ, the hope of glory” (**Colossians 1:25-28**). Paul expresses this same truth in his first letter to Corinth this way: “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (**1 Corinthians 1:30**). The two expressions employed—“The mystery of the faith” (**1 Timothy 3:9**) and “the mystery of piety” (**3:16**)—pertain to our faith and to our devotion to glorify Him.^[2]

THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

He Appeared in A Body

Paul begins this “mystery of godliness” by calling attention to the incarnation—“He appeared in a body” (**3:16a**). The virgin birth is not limited to only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Paul, too, zeros in on the virgin birth in that God prepared a body for Jesus. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians (AD 48/49), addresses this subject: “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (**Galatians 4:4**). The author of Hebrews presents this same concept:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (**Hebrews 2:14-18**).

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is found throughout the New Testament writings. For example, Paul, in writing to the Philippians, expresses the incarnation this way: “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—

even death on a cross!” (**Philippians 2:8**). As cited above, John, an Apostle of Jesus, begins his Gospel with the following words: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (**John 1:14**). Again, as quoted above, the author of Hebrews writes: “He too shared in their humanity” (**Hebrews 2:14**). One cannot deny that Paul believed in the incarnation of Jesus. Paul starts his Roman epistle with the following eye-catching words: “Regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David” (**Romans 1:3**). Once more, the author of Hebrews cites **Psalm 40:6-8** to demonstrate that God prepared a body for Jesus: “Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; ⁶ with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased’” (**Hebrews 10:5-6**).

Today there are religious groups who deny the virgin birth, that is to say that God “appeared in a body” (“manifested in the flesh,” KJV), and who also deny that Jesus was “vindicated by the Spirit” (“justified in the Spirit,” KJV). John, too, combated this form of denial of Jesus’ humanity in the philosophy of Gnosticism—a group that denied that Jesus had a flesh and blood body. But this same belief was also true among many Jews. As John seeks to combat the denial of Jesus’ humanity, he writes: “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist” (**2 John 7**). What should the reaction of Christians be against those who deny this basic fundamental truth of the gospel: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (**John 1:14**)? Listen to John as he explains the critical nature of this belief: “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. ¹¹ Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work” (**2 John 10**). Earlier John had warned about the antichrist:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world (**1 John 4:1-3**).

The church cannot falter in upholding neither the doctrine of the virgin birth nor the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church is “the pillar and foundation of the truth” (**1 Timothy 3:15**). The church must uphold the doctrines set forth in **1 Timothy 3:16**. The church holds forth the words of life to a lost and dying world. The gospel of God must be preached. What is the gospel? Listen to Paul as he explains to Timothy: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel” (**2 Timothy 2:8**). This condensed statement concerning the essence of the gospel by Paul equals the first two points of his creed in **1 Timothy 3:16**: “He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit.” In **2 Timothy 2:8**, the phrase “raised from the dead” is equivalent to “vindicated by the Spirit” and “descended from David” is equivalent to “he appeared in a body.” These two doctrines are reversed in **2 Timothy 2:8** from **1 Timothy 3:16**.

Vindicated By the Spirit

As one reflects upon the words “vindicated by the Spirit,” one cannot help but ponder this particular phrase. Just what does this saying mean? This expression may be multifaceted in its depth. For one thing, one can surely say that Jesus was “vindicated by the Spirit” in his resurrection. Paul addresses this concept in Romans: “Who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord” (**Romans 1:4**). The resurrection of Jesus proves everything. The KJV’s rendering of “justified in the Spirit” is somewhat confusing. The word *justified* is not used in the same sense that it is used when the word is applied to Christians. With Jesus, the word carries with it the idea of vindication, or exoneration. In spite of the fact of His crucifixion, the Holy Spirit vindicated Jesus from all charges through Christ’s resurrection. The Holy Spirit furnished the evidence that He was the Son of God, that is to say, justified His claims.

Also, one should not forget the role that the Holy Spirit played in His life. Matthew informs his readers that at the conception of Mary that an angel of God told Joseph: “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (**Matthew 1:20**). Also, at the baptism of Jesus, Matthew again informs his readers about how Jesus, following His baptism, “He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him” (**3:16**). John, too, records the words of Jesus concerning the role of the Holy Spirit in relationship to Himself:

But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

⁸ When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me (**John 16:7-8**).

Jesus, in His conversation with Nicodemus, gives further testimony concerning the Holy Spirit and Himself: “For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit” (**3:34**). Also, on the day of Pentecost, Peter says, “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.”³³ Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear” (**Acts 2:32-33**). On the day of Pentecost, three thousand responded to gospel call and were added to the Christian

community (2:41, 47). Once more, one witnesses the vindication of Jesus' ministry with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all those that accepted Jesus as the One whom God made both Lord and Christ (2:36). With this outpouring of the Spirit and the conversion of three thousand, one is again confronted with proof that the Holy Spirit vindicated the Redeemer—the One sent from God for the salvation of humanity.

Seen by Angels

As one reflects upon this statement by Paul, one cannot help but call to mind the role that angels played in the ministry of Jesus. Luke records an encounter that some shepherds experienced with an angel of God. One witnesses an angel announcing the birth of the Messiah:

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God (Luke 2:8-13).

Not only did an angel appear at the birth of Jesus, but Luke also informs Theophilus, the one to whom Luke wrote his Gospel, that Jesus in His final hours, while praying on the Mount of Olives, an angel of God appeared to Jesus in order to strengthen Him:

³⁹ Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ On reaching the place, he said to them, “**Pray that you will not fall into temptation.**” ⁴¹ He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ⁴² “**Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.**” ⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. ⁴⁴ And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground (22:39-44).

The author of Hebrews also calls alertness to the angelic host at the birth of Jesus: “And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God's angels worship him’” (Hebrews 11:6). Furthermore, as cited above, Luke informs Theophilus: “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God” (Luke 2:13). Luke opens the birth of Jesus with angels present and closes the life of Jesus with an angel strengthening Him (22:43). Following Matthew's account of the Temptation of Jesus, he, too, describes the task that angels played in the ministry of Jesus: “Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him” (Matthew 4:11).

The writers of the New Testament zero in on the interest that the angels had in Him and His work, and they came to Him in His sorrows and in His troubles. Paul, in

his poetic section (**1 Timothy 3:16**), seeks to give an imposing vision of the splendor and magnificence of the heavenly host, which drew them from the skies that they might announce His coming, take care of Him in His temptations, behold His crucifixion, and keep an eye on Him in the tomb. Even though the religious leaders despised the work of Christ in His day, nevertheless, the angels of God manifested the deepest interest in Him:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care,¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.¹² It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things (**1 Peter 1:10-12**).

Preached Among the Nations

As one mulls over these words of Paul in **1 Timothy 3:16**, one can hardly fail to recall the words of Jesus to His disciples before His ascension:

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.**”¹⁹ **Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,**²⁰ **and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”** (**Matthew 28:18-20**).

The disciples were to “go and make disciples of all nations.” How were they to make disciples? They made disciples by preaching the Gospel, which is Jesus as God’s way of salvation. Mark expresses the same truth as found in Matthew this way: “He said to them, **“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.**”¹⁶ **Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned”** (**Mark 16:16**).

Just a perusal of the **Book of Acts** reveals that the Apostles and the disciples of Jesus preached Christ wherever they went. During the early days of Christianity, a dissension arose over the neglect of Grecian widows in the distribution of daily food (**Acts 6:1-2**). Out of this controversy, seven men who were “full of the Spirit and wisdom” were chosen to oversee this work (**6:3**). The Apostles declined oversight of this needed work in order to devote themselves “to prayer and the ministry of the word” (**6:4**). As a result of the preaching of Jesus, Luke says, “the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly” (**6:7**). Following the preaching and persecution of Stephen (**Chapter 7**), one of the seven Deacons (Philip) went to Samaria and “proclaimed the Christ there” (**8:5**). His preaching was so powerful that Luke records the results with the following penetrating words:

But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and

women.¹³ Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw (8:12-13).

As one seeks to understand what it is that they preached, one cannot help but observe the terminology employed to describe the Gospel that they preached. This differentiation should assist Christians in their understanding of what it is that one should preach. For example, the following description should aid one in comprehending the substance of their preaching and how they described it: (1) “preached the word” [8:4], (2) “proclaimed the Christ” [8:5], and (3) “preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus” [8:12]. With all of these explanatory terms, Luke informs Theophilus that the Apostles in Jerusalem had heard that the people in Samaria “had accepted the word of God” (8:14). Surely the Apostles must have shared The Great Commission issued by the resurrected Christ before His ascension.

This One who was “despised and rejected by men” (Isaiah 53:3) is now universally heralded as the Savior of the world. Peter in his address before the Sanhedrin goes right to the heart of the Gospel: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). This phrase—“preached among the nations”—is a reference to the worldwide mission of the Christian community. The missionary journeys of Paul reveal the nature of this evangelistic campaign to proclaim Jesus as the Savior of the world. In the proclamation of Christ, Paul sets forth the idea that the Gospel is for all who respond to the Good News of God’s kingdom—whether Jews or Gentiles. His missionary activities in Ephesus eventually resulted in his writing to the Christians in Asia Minor concerning this mystery made known to him by revelation (Ephesians 3:3). Immediately, he explains this mystery: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (3:6).

Paul continuously develops this mystery in his epistles. For instance, in his letter to the Colossians, he speaks of the mystery that had been hidden from ages and from generations now made known to his saints (Colossians 1:26). Then in the very next breath, he tells what this mystery is:

To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.²⁸ We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.²⁹ To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me (1:27-29).

Even in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he elaborates on the object of preaching by himself and others involved in this evangelistic outreach:

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who

believe. ²² Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength (**1 Corinthians 1:20-25**).

Believed On in the World

This faith in Jesus was as a result of the pre-ascension mandate to evangelize the world. One cannot read the **Book of Acts** and other books without a consciousness of the impact that the Gospel had in the lives of those who heard the Good News of God's way of salvation by faith in His Son. One witnesses, not only rejection, but one also witnesses thousands responding to the preaching about Jesus. This phrase—"believed on in the world"—is an allusion to the success of Jesus being "preached among the nations." Within fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, Peter and the other apostles preached to thousands on the Day of Pentecost (**Acts 2:1-14**).

Three thousand on that one day believed the message about Jesus (**2:41**). Following this event, one finds Peter and John in trouble with the religious authorities (**4:1**). Within just a short time, the number of disciples grew to about five thousand (**4:4**). Luke gives the background of this scenario and the results of their preaching:

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. ² They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. ⁴ But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand (**4:1-4**).

One cannot read the **Book of Acts** without an awareness of the success that the preaching about Jesus accomplished. One more example from the **Book of Acts** should suffice to confirm once more the statement of Paul to Timothy that Jesus "was believed on in the world." Luke also reports the result of Philip's preaching in Samaria:

But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³ Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw (**8:12**).

Taken Up in Glory

One stands in awe as one contemplates the ascension of Christ. Today, Christ is at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is there, but, at the same time, He is here in His people. He is waiting for you to approach the throne of grace with boldness. Have you talked with Him today? Have you thanked Him for your redemption? This marvelous hymn about Christ moves from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm. Christians

today still carry the burden of conveying this “mystery of godliness” to the world. This event was the crowning grandeur of the work of Christ. Surely this occurrence must have thrilled even the angels in heaven itself. John, the Apostle, gives a glimpse of the exhilaration and marvel of it all by the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, and the angelic host numbering into thousands upon thousands (**Revelation 5:6-14**). John describes the behavior of the angels this way:

¹¹ Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. ¹² In a loud voice they sang: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (**5:11-12**).

The author of Hebrews, too, was conscious of the grandeur of His ascension and its implications for believers. He seeks to capture the importance of this event within the scheme of redemption:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (**Hebrews 4:14-16**).

Is it any wonder that Paul says that Jesus “was taken up in glory”? This is a cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith. Every Christian should keep this truth in mind as he/she goes about sharing the Good News about Jesus as the only way to God. Yes, Jesus passed through the heavens, that is to say, He entered into God’s presence. And, as a result of this ascension, everyone who puts his/her trust in Jesus has access to God. In other words, Jesus opened the way for individuals to approach God; He is there at the throne of grace to intercede on behalf of those who come. Again, the writer-preacher expresses this same truth this way: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (**7:25**).

As one reflects upon “who has gone through the heavens,” one also recalls the words of this epistle in **chapter 8, verses 1 and 2**: “The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.” This statement is an affirmation of His ministry and His position as High Priest. One can readily see why Paul in his first epistle to Timothy listed the ascension as of major importance in the proclamation of the Gospel. Once more listen to the preacher as he sets forth this truth concerning the ascension and humanity’s redemption through the blood of Jesus:

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. ¹² He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption (**9:11-12**).

Jesus offered His own life to God in order to make atonement for sinful humanity, to open the way for mankind to approach God fully with confidence, and to create the new covenant that Jeremiah (31:33-34) had so clearly promised with great and exceeding precious promises. The Hebrews writer hammers home this point as he elaborates upon Jesus' ministry in the heavens:

¹⁰ This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ¹¹ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. ¹² For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Hebrews 8:10-12).

Perhaps, one can say that Christ's sacrifice was consummated in heaven. As one reflects upon His death upon the cross, His ascension, His entrance into the sanctuary of God's presence, one quickly realizes that all of these acts constitute one redemptive act. Is it any wonder that Paul includes the "ascension" as one of the cardinal doctrines of the "Good News" of God's way of salvation? Again, what does it mean to say that He "was taken up in glory"? Frequently, Christians think too little of this marvelous and glorious event—the Lord's ascension. As one reflects upon His incarnation, one knows that that event is wonderful. When one ponders His temptation and His victory in the desert, one comes away with a feeling of wonderment. One can scarcely contemplate His resurrection from the grave without cognition of such a colossal happening. But there is a sense in which His ascension tops all these marvelous events in His life. One is catapulted, as it were, into the orbit of glory as one reflects upon all this majesty, this divinity, this power, and this glory as He passes through the heavens.

The pulpits of Christian churches today do not give sufficient attention to this majestic topic set forth in Holy Scripture. As one thinks about the life of Christ, one is immediately conscious of Jesus' rapture into glory as the consummation of all the wonders of redemption. When Christ became incarnate, He brought God down to mankind; but when he was "taken up in glory," He bore men and women up to God. Men and women can now approach the "throne of grace" (Hebrews 4:16). One should never forget that when He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive and gave gifts to men. Paul calls this great doctrine of redemption to the attention of the Christians in Ephesus:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." ⁹ (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹ It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:7-13).

Every Christian is enriched today because of His ascension triumph. The author of Hebrews sheds light on this continuing ministry of Jesus in heaven as the “forerunner.” He pens:

This *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence *behind* the veil, ²⁰where the forerunner has entered for us, *even* Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (**Hebrews 6:19-20**, NKJV).

This author draws upon the imagery of the tabernacle and the mediating work of the high priest in order to paint a graphic picture of the work of Jesus as the High Priest. Just as the high priest entered the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, so Jesus has entered the inner sanctuary on our behalf, which is heaven itself. In the author-preacher description of Jesus’ continuing ministry, he speaks of Jesus as the “forerunner” (προψδρομῶ prodromos). Fred B. Craddock captures, in his excellent commentary on Hebrews, the full significance of the Greek word, which is translated “forerunner”:

The second affirmation in v. 20 about Jesus as high priest is that Jesus entered behind the veil into God’s presence as a “forerunner” (προψδρομῶ prodromos). This is the only use of the word in the NT, although it occurs in the LXX and in Greek literature in various contexts: the runner out in front in an athletic event; a herald announcing the approach of an important person or group; a scout in advance of an army; or even the early fruit that promised the arrival of the harvest. In the culture of the tabernacle or Temple, the high priest was not a forerunner. No others, not even priests, followed him into the holy of holies; he went alone. By contrast, Christ, even though his salvific work of offering himself was peculiar to him alone, was a forerunner; that is, he prepared for others to follow. This interprets in part the third affirmation: Christ entered “on our behalf.” Just as his earthly ministry of death on the cross was on our behalf, so also is his continuing ministry in God’s presence, not solely as intercessor but as the one who makes possible our entry into the heavenly sanctuary.^[3]

Unlike the high priest that ministered in the earthly tabernacle, Jesus, not only entered behind the curtain, but as “forerunner,” He paved the way for others to enter behind the curtain—the Most Holy Place—that is to say, heaven itself. Everyone may now approach the “throne of grace” through the High Priest as “forerunner.” The story of Jesus’ ministry begins on earth, but it continues in heaven. Paul is saying, essentially the same thing that the author of Hebrews is writing, in Ephesians, as he explains, that Jesus ascended into heaven in victory and triumph and gave all kinds of gifts to certain individuals to prepare His community of believers for service. In His descent, He captured, as it were, captivity itself. Thus, he was able to lead “captives in his train” in His ascension. As a result of this ascension, He paved the way for humanity to approach the “throne of grace,” that is, to enter behind the curtain that separated the Holy from the Most Holy. Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God making intercession for each individual that seeks the mercy and grace of God. Under the Mosaic dispensation, the priests were not allowed to enter the Most Holy Place, only the high priest. Since the high priests in the earthly sanctuary were not “forerunners,” then the priests could not enter the Most Holy, but now, all priests (every child of God) can follow Jesus.

The “throne of grace” is a beautiful and meaningful expression. This throne is designed to dispense mercy and pardon to the one who comes seeking forgiveness. One may approach this “throne of grace” because Jesus went through the heavens and is now seated at the right hand of God. The following words of the author of Hebrews should thrill one to his/her innermost being:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (**Hebrews 4:14-16**).

This is what everyone needs—pardon. Even with pardon, one needs grace to keep one from sin, to aid one in his/her daily walk with God, and to strengthen one when temptations come knocking at one’s door. Everyone is invited to freely approach the “throne of grace.” Everyone needs this privilege of coming before the “throne of grace.” What kind of a world would this be if God only sat upon a throne of justice? How dreadful this world would be if God exhibited no mercy. If these two things were true—strictly justice and no mercy—then one would be overwhelmed with despair. But this is not the case. Jesus is still exercising His ministry as High Priest (**4:14-16**—as cited above). Yes, everyone is sinful; everyone needs mercy; everyone is feeble; everyone needs grace to help in the time of need. The words of Jesus, as revealed to John on the island of Patmos, echo the sentiments of God’s “throne of grace”: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life” (**Revelation 22:17**).

CONCLUSION

What does this hymn of praise mean to you? Do you want God to use you to proclaim this “mystery of devotion” in order to lead men and women to Him? Are you appreciative of what God has accomplished for the redemption of humanity? If not, then one cannot be an effective minister in God’s kingdom. For one to be used by the Lord, one must first appreciate the Lord. Can you sing the words of David: “He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD” (**Psalms 40:3**)?

As one looks back upon the crucifixion, one hears voices crying out: “Crucify him!” (**Matthew 27:22, 23**). But, on the other hand, one hears the echoes of jubilant singing by angels “numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand” (**Revelation 5:11**). Yes, men rejected Him, but heaven received Him—“was taken up in glory” (**1 Timothy 3:16**). If men and women are not pardoned, they alone suffer the blame. There is a “throne of grace.” Jesus is always interceding. He is the Great High Priest of men and women. God accomplished redemption through His Son, Jesus:

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory (**3:16**).

^[1] All Scripture citations are from *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984, unless stated otherwise.

^[2] For an excellent discussion of the differentiation between the two phrases, see William Hendriksen, *I & II Timothy & Titus*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 137.

^[3] Fred B. Craddock, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, in Leander E. Keck, Senior New Testament Editor, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, XII, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 82.